

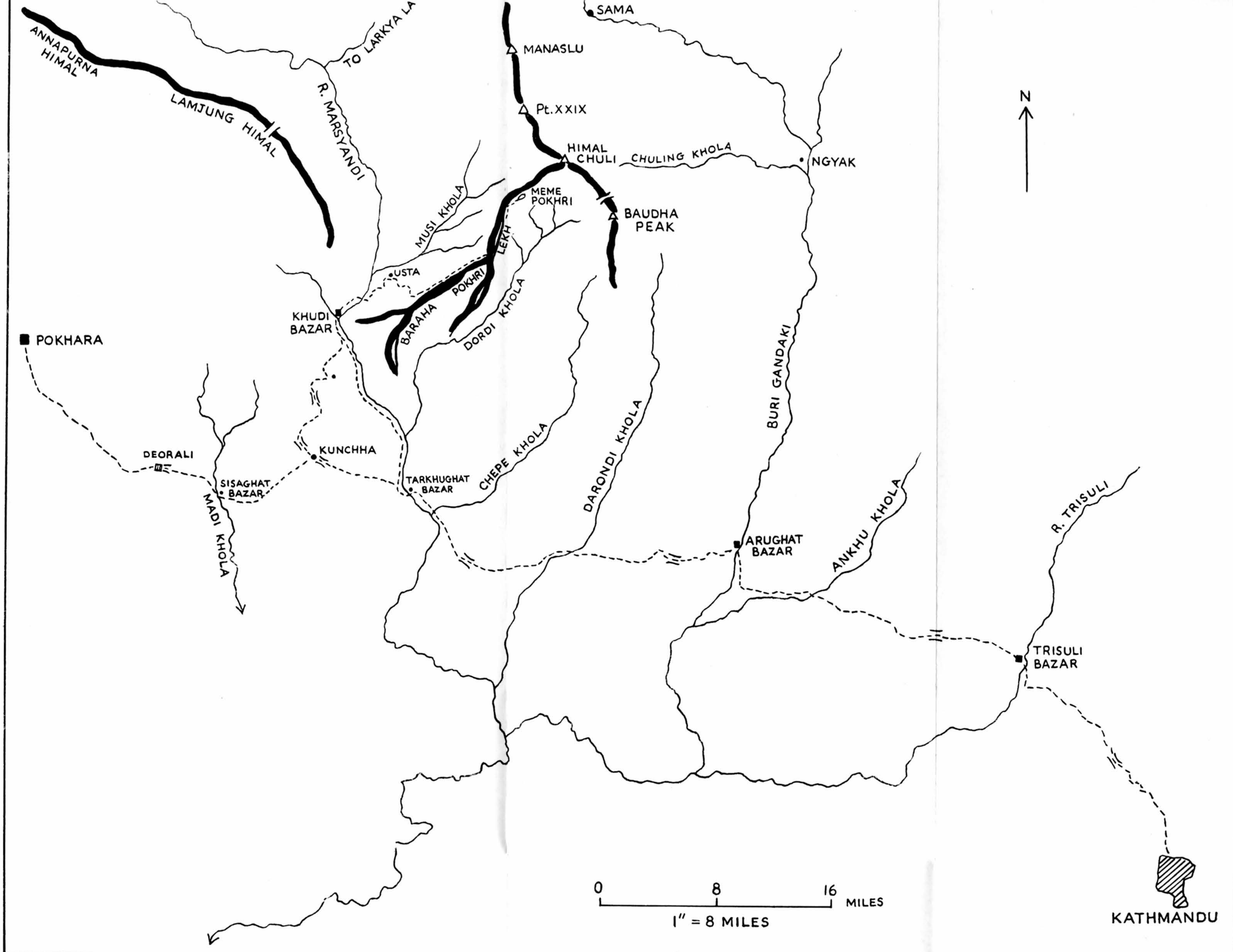
## SAFARI IN NEPAL

BY JOHN HOWARD

THE ascent of Mt. Everest was the close of one era and the beginning of another—it was at once the culmination of more than half a century of exploration and high-altitude effort, and also the inspiration for others to explore the many peaks and ranges which still remained unvisited by Europeans. Arthur Firmin and I decided to take a small private party—economically equipped without oxygen, wireless and other burdensome paraphernalia—to tackle a worthwhile peak which had not yet been climbed. We sought and were granted permission to try Himal Chuli (25,801 ft.) and Baudha Peak (c. 21,600 ft.); later, after reaching Kathmandu, we found that the Japanese were not sending a pre-monsoon party to Manaslu (26,665 ft.), so we asked leave to switch to that, but the Nepalese Foreign Secretary had not been officially told of the Japanese change of plans and he could not agree to our poaching on the preserves of other nations.

Himal Chuli had already been approached from the south-west by Tilman and Roberts in 1950, and from the east by Showell Styles, and also by the Japanese, in 1954; Hilton had also made a solo effort on the eastern slopes in the same year; but we gathered that none of those parties had been much higher than about 16,000–17,000 ft. We were lucky to have advice from most of our forerunners, and Major Roberts was kind enough to send us some photographs which showed that it might be possible to make the ascent by the South-west ridge. A long hog's back with footpaths and summer grazing—the Baraha Pokhri Lekh (or Ridge of the Big Lake)—abutted against the mountain and afforded an excellent means of access, at any rate up to about 19,000 ft., and Tilman and Roberts had been to the Meme Lake at about 16,000 ft. The upper part of the mountain on this side looked quite feasible; the unknown bit was between about 19,000 and 22,000 ft. Against this we had to weigh the chances of getting high on the East side. Showell Styles thought that it might be possible to reach the col between Himal Chuli and Baudha from the Chhuling Khola, and attempt either or both from there; that was the plan which we tentatively proposed for ourselves, and failing that we would switch operations to the South-west side by crossing the Larkya La. But when we set out from Kathmandu it was agreed to leave the matter open until we had had a view of the peak on the march out. At Arughat Bazar, the parting of the ways, we should have to make up our minds whether to go north up the Buri Gandaki to the East side, or to continue westwards and strike up the Marsyandi to Usta.

Our party was eventually made up as follows: Arthur Firmin, the foremost mountaineer and photographer in East Africa; David



Wilson, President of the Kenya Mountain Club and a newspaper editor ; Pat Nolan-Neylan of the Aden Posts and Telephones Department, who had climbed a good deal with Firmin and myself ; Robert Caukwell, a Kenya Government surveyor, who had recently made a fine new ice route on Mt. Kenya ; John Lane, a Kenya farmer who had so far done no climbing but who had walked many miles behind the Japanese lines in Burma and was very tough and keen ; and myself. Our doctor unfortunately had to cry off as he was unable to find a suitable *locum tenens* ; we made unsuccessful attempts to find a substitute. After some anxious consideration Firmin and I decided that the absence of a doctor must not cause us to abandon our long-cherished plans ; after all we had the most modern drugs and medical equipment and were much better off in this respect than pre-war expeditions. One of our number was specially coached in the use of these drugs and very well he was to perform in the only crisis that arose.

Our Sherpa team, kindly arranged by Mrs. Henderson of Darjeeling, consisted of Ang Nyima, an Everest 'Tiger' ; his wife, a cheerful soul who became known as 'Cherry' ; Pemba Norbu, an old hand and a fine type, who acted as cook ; and Lakhpa Gelbu, who had been with the Japanese on Manaslu. A fourth Sherpa, Ourken, was sent back sick a few marches out from Kathmandu.

The original idea was to have the safari entirely unpublicised and unsponsored financially, but the expenses (especially of Sherpas) rose to such alarming proportions that we were obliged to seek some help with foods from local firms. We also applied for, and were kindly granted, some assistance from the Mount Everest Foundation. In the main, however, the expenses were shared out amongst the members of the expedition.

We were an all-Kenya party and I believe the first group—certainly not the first individuals—to set out from Africa to visit Nepal ; no doubt parties would be organised from the Union of South Africa if the political difficulties in crossing India were not so great. Our main purpose was to explore the Himal Chuli-Baudha region—if possible to get to the top of one of them—and to make a photographic record of the area. Firmin took a Ciné Kodak Special, a wide-angle Linhof, a Leica, and two Rolleiflexes, whilst we others were all armed with one or more cameras of various brands.

In spite of what we thought were pretty thorough arrangements to smooth the passage of our baggage through India, poor Nolan-Neylan and Caukwell were held up for ten days by the Bombay Customs officials, and most of the rest of the party involuntarily spent another week in Patna. Eventually the last member and the last item of equipment were flown into Kathmandu on March 29, and, after exasperating delays due to public holidays and lack of coin at the bank, the column, consisting of six sahibs, our Nepali interpreter, four Sherpas plus one wife, and sixty-eight porters, set out on April Fool's Day from the Snowview Hotel, Kathmandu.

Much to our relief there was no enthusiasm amongst the porters to march long stages ; we reached Trisuli Bazar on the third day out, and Arughat Bazar on the sixth. The weather was fine, but the deep purple haze limited visibility to ten miles or so and we had seen nothing of our peaks. This meant that the decision as to future route must be made without visual aids ; however, it was simplified by the fact that we now had insufficient funds to encircle the range should one side or the other prove abortive, and we could plan on the assumption that we must make a hit or miss attempt on one side or the other. According to the information available the South-west ridge seemed the best bet, so we decided accordingly. We realised that we had burned our boats so far as Baudha was concerned because the col between Baudha and Himal Chuli was undoubtedly inaccessible from the west. So it was to be the South-west ridge of Himal Chuli.

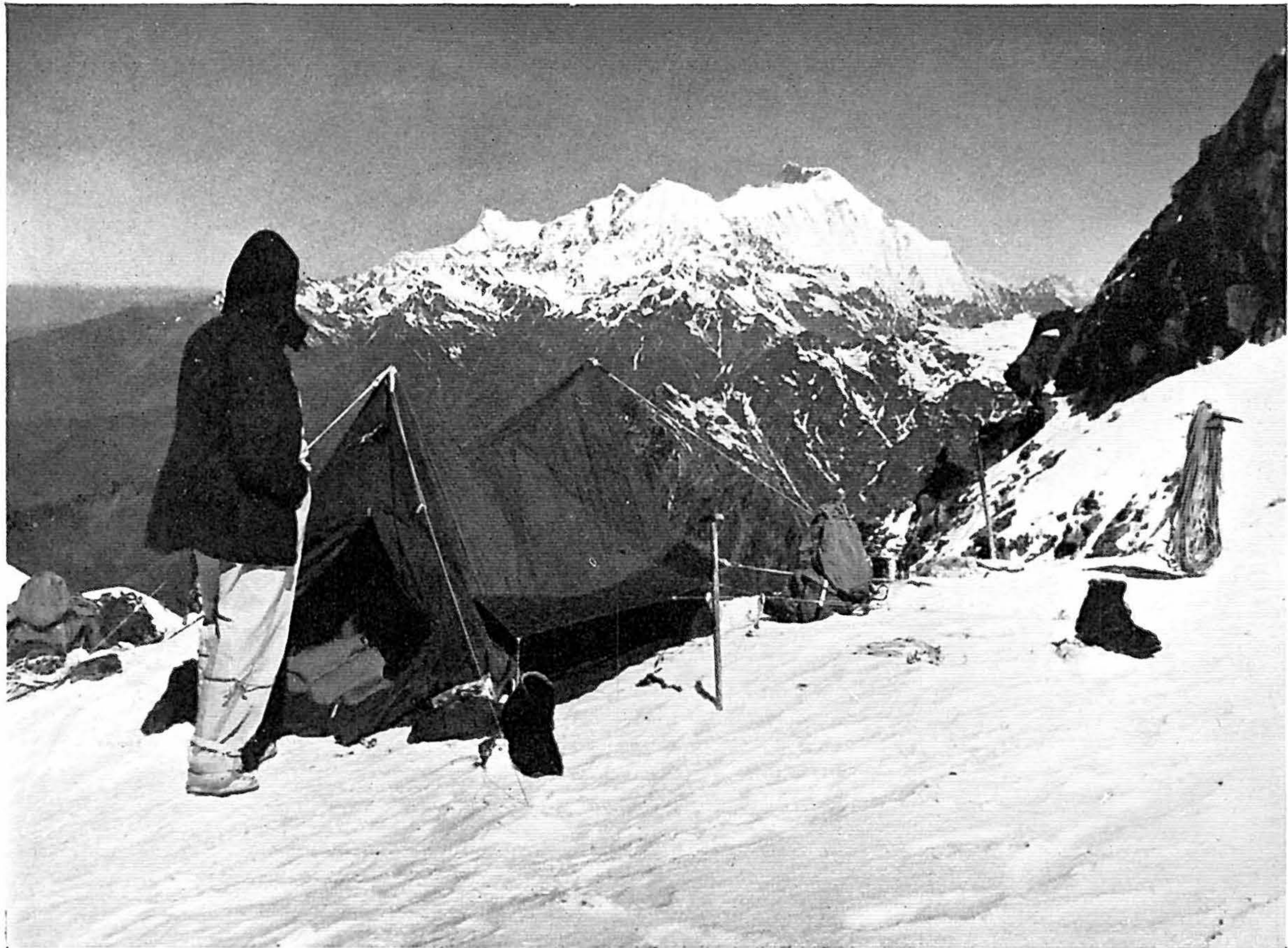
At Usta (4,800 ft.), the last village on our route, which we reached on April 14, we at last regained the height lost since leaving the hills round Kathmandu, and the next day we camped at 8,000 ft. on the crest of the great Baraha Pokhri Lekh, which we proposed to follow the whole way up. From here we had splendid views of Manaslu, Point XXIX (a 25,000-footer which lies just south of Manaslu), and our own Himal Chuli.

The advantage of a gradual ridge approach to your mountain is that you have extensive views and can see the lie of the land. The disadvantages are shortage of water below the snow-line, and, if the ridge only gains height gradually, a long horizontal distance from the snow line to the peak. Both these disadvantages hit us badly. As low as about 11,500 ft. we trod snow, and the Kathmandu porters, without footwear, somewhat understandably declined to continue, although they had contracted to carry to the Base Camp at Meme Pokhri (about 16,000 ft. and about two day's march away). We had some spare boots and goggles, but insufficient for more than about a dozen men. This was a blow, though not a knock-out blow. The post-monsoon photographs had shown Meme Pokhri, and the rocks immediately above it, free of snow ; and we, in our innocence, had imagined that the same conditions would prevail in late spring. Instead, we were faced with carrying about seventy loads, without porters, over several snow and rock ridges before we could establish a base. An added difficulty was the distance from human habitation, where local porters might be available. Near the main watershed of the Himalayas there are villages at 10,000 or 12,000 ft. for instance Namche Bazar on the Everest route or Sama on the Manaslu route, but Himal Chuli is perched on a branch chain running south from the main watershed. The valley floors on each side are no higher than 2,000-3,000 feet and there are no permanent villages more than a few thousand feet above the valleys. Thus, on our route, Usta was the last village and the local inhabitants, Gurungs and Tamangs, were not accustomed to carrying at great heights, not at any rate at this time of the year with snow lying so low. There was nothing for it, therefore, but to hump the loads ourselves with such

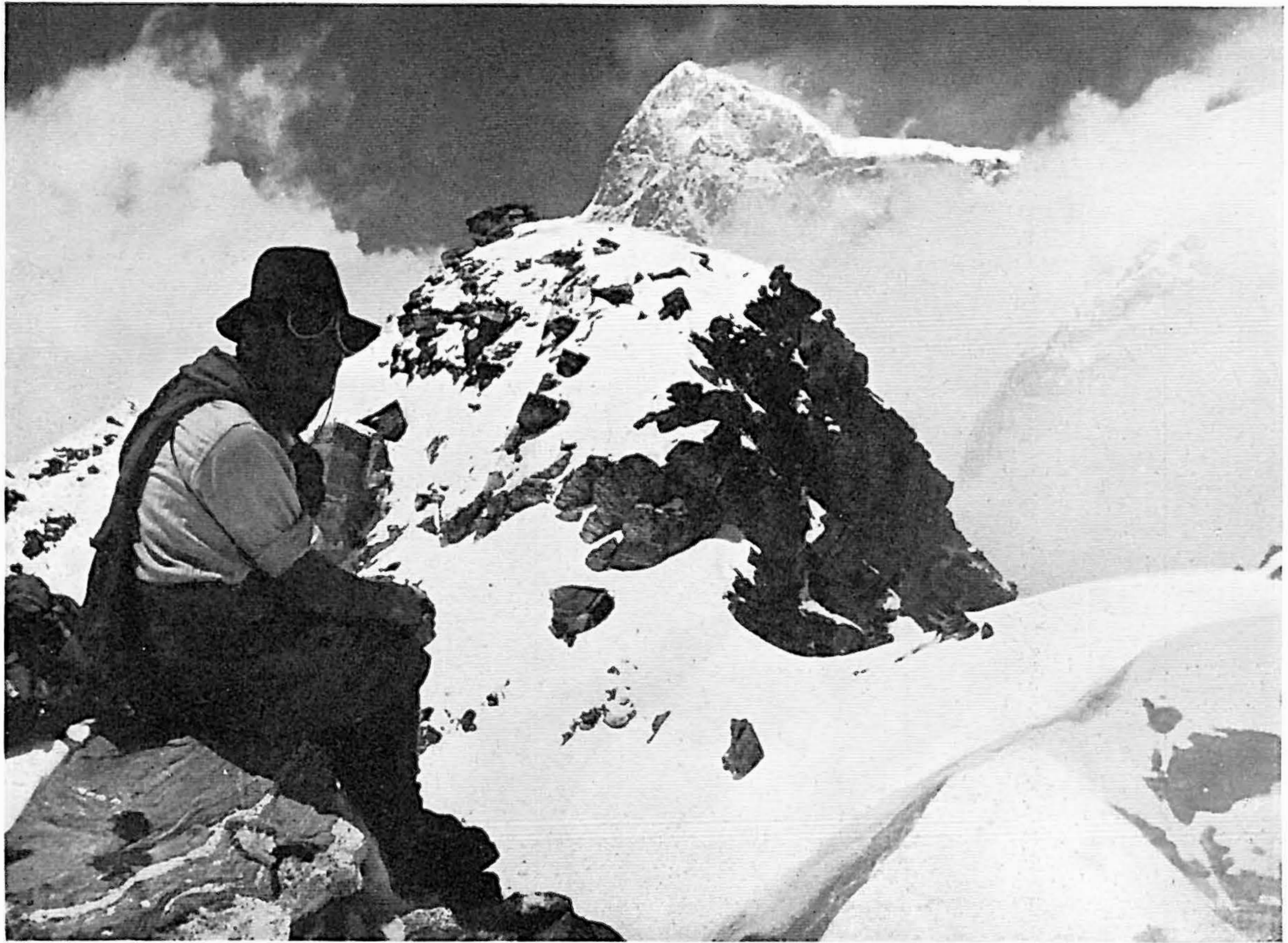


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THE SUMMIT (RIGHT) AND WESTERN SUMMIT (CENTRE) OF HIMAL CHULI FROM BASE CAMP AT 16,000 ft.  
FIRMIN IN FOREGROUND.



ANNAPURNA II (RIGHT) AND MACHHA PUCHHARE (LEFT) FROM CAMP AT 19,500 ft. WILSON IN FOREGROUND.



POINT XXIX FROM SNOW DOME. THE ROCK TOWER IN CENTRE WAS HIGHEST POINT REACHED.  
FIRMIN IN FOREGROUND.



LOOKING BACK FROM SNOW DOME ALONG OUR S.W. RIDGE OF APPROACH.

locals as we could scratch up—these never exceeded eight or ten in number. The Sherpas and Tamangs carried 50–60 lb. and we ourselves about 40 lb. It was tedious work, aggravated by the difficulty of finding an easy route over complicated country, and by the snowstorms which blew up nearly every afternoon from April 24 onwards—my diary records that between April 24 and May 23 (when we returned below the snowline again) we only had three days free of hail, sleet or snow, but at least it got us thoroughly fit and well acclimatised. Our worst enemy was the soft snow; after a few hours of morning sunshine we were often wading and floundering knee or waist deep on south slopes, and there was no alternative route.

All this time we were traversing below the main ridge, involving the crossing of several steep subsidiary ridges. One member of the party involuntarily got benighted when looking for a better route and the rest of the expedition spent an anxious time searching for him before he turned up quite unconcernedly the next morning, having spent a more comfortable night than his rescuers, in the bamboo forest 5,000 ft. below!

Eventually, after many vicissitudes, we established our Base Camp at about 16,000 ft., on a safe, though exposed, snow plateau about half an hour short of Meme Pokhri, and next day pushed a reconnaissance above the ice- and snow-covered lake.

About 3,500 ft. above the lake there is a prominent snow peak (the Snow Dome) on the main ridge. This seemed to lead directly to the ice steps below the western summit—at any rate it was the obvious point from which to plan the way ahead. Accordingly, at 1.30 P.M. on May 6, Firmin and I reached the top of the Snow Dome (about 20,000 ft.) in very trying conditions of soft snow and hot sun. The last lap was a steep traverse to the delicate summit ridge which for long had hidden our view of the peak. We looked forward to seeing the upper part of the mountain at close quarters and within our grasp. A sharp wave of disappointment swept over us when to our dismay we saw that six rock towers with sharp intervening arêtes still separated us from the main mountain mass and that the route was quite out of the question for heavy load-carrying even if it was feasible for unladen climbers. This was the cock's-comb ridge we had seen from below; we thought we had already by-passed it in reaching the Snow Dome. Later on, Firmin, Wilson and I established a camp near the summit of the Snow Dome and by climbing along the ridge to the first rock tower we confirmed our bad opinion of this route.

There were now two alternatives—to by-pass the cock's-comb either on the north or on the south. A recce on the south side revealed steep cliffs descending to the Dordi Khola with no hope of a turning movement on this side; it also revealed a tremendous view of the 10,000-ft. South-west ice face of Himal Chuli—we idly traced a way up this face by snow corridors and couloirs, but there were too many threatening hanging glaciers to make it justifiable and it looked about twice as dangerous as the lower part of Nanga Parbat.

Caukwell and Ang Nyima did the North side recce and returned with some hope. In two days they had reached the foot of a prominent curving ice ridge which at the top seemed to by-pass the ice steps and might lead out on to the upper snow plateau below the western summit. The ice ridge was steep and access to it involved crossing avalanche-threatened slopes, but it was a possibility and at least it by-passed the cock's-comb. Caukwell and Ang Nyima had gone some way up the ice ridge (perhaps to 20,000 ft.) though not to the top. They recommended a further attempt to gain the top of the ice ridge.

By this time our hopes for a successful attempt had passed, but we were determined to carry out as thorough a reconnaissance as possible. However, in order to prepare for the return march, which might involve the slow process of carrying our loads back to below the snow level, Nolan-Neylan, accompanied by the Nepali interpreter and a Sherpa, had on May 11 left for Khudi Bazar to attempt to recruit porters with the help of the local army detachment stationed at Khudi.

Early on May 16, Firmin, Pemba Norbu and I set out from Base Camp on a final four days' reconnaissance. We were carrying all our own camp equipment and food, but the weather seemed better and we were in high spirits. The first part of the way lay round the shores of Meme Pokhri and up the trough beyond. We were crossing a patch of boulder scree when disaster struck.

It all happened in a few seconds. Firmin stumbled on a rickety boulder and in falling a few feet he grasped another boulder which collapsed on top of him and broke his left thigh. The fall was nothing in itself and in the normal course of events he would have picked himself up and walked on none the worse. It was a most unlucky accident and our predicament, so far from help, was serious.

All energies were immediately directed to summoning help and getting the injured man down the mountain. Caukwell ran down to Khudi alone, arriving at 3 P.M. on the 17th; unfortunately the army radio at Khudi was out of order, but a runner was despatched to Kunchha where there was a telephone to Pokhara. All messages had to be written in English, then translated into Nepali, and finally retranslated into Roman Urdu for the benefit of the telegraph operators. Ang Nyima descended to the nearest patch of forest and returned with stout poles for a stretcher. We others (there were four of us left—David Wilson, John Lane, Pemba Norbu and myself) concentrated on medical aid and arrangements for the long carry. On the 17th we carried Firmin back to Base Camp, arriving just in time before a heavy snowstorm set in; during the next week we had some of the worst blizzards of the trip at the very time that we most needed sunshine. The next stretch below Base involved a long traverse across soft snow lying on steep slopes, followed by a descent over outward-sloping rock shelves to a steep gully, and was out of the question to attempt with the stretcher without more manpower. At last on the evening of the 20th a Sherpa arrived with nine Tamangs wearing rope shoes, and on the 21st, after four hours' struggle, we were over the *mauvais pas* and had made

about one mile of horizontal distance before the usual snowstorm set in and we were obliged to camp. Next day the porters, thoroughly miserable, did not appear from below until 10 A.M., but some reinforcements had arrived and, once started, excellent progress was made over some snow-free stretches. About 3 P.M. we were faced with the descent of a steep 500-ft. north-west facing slope which was icy in patches and involved safeguarding each porter, one by one, with elaborate precautions for the stretcher. Once Lane slipped near the top and only by a miracle saved himself from falling to destruction. It was with great relief that we pitched camp that evening at the foot of the slope. Another blizzard blew up that evening and lasted for six hours, making night nursing especially difficult. The patient was bearing up well in spite of the obvious great pain whenever the effect of the morphia or drugs wore off. We were terrified that our supplies of these would give out before we could replenish them and Wilson had descended ahead of us on the 20th to hasten the arrival of a doctor and drugs, to try for a helicopter from the Indian Air Force, and to send the latest news to Kenya.

By the evening of May 23 we were at last below the snow-line in a smiling land of rhododendrons, green grass and twittering birds. We hoped that this change from winter into spring would cheer up poor Firmin, and next day we managed to accomplish the long drop down the ridge to Usta. Before leaving the ridge, at about 8,500 ft., we were overjoyed to meet two gallant British nurses, Miss Steele and Miss Lodge, who had set out from Pokhara Hospital immediately after getting our news, and who the day before had climbed up 6,000 ft from Khudi with Nolan-Neylan. No praise is high enough for these devoted women who nursed Firmin through the next five days of strenuous up and down going. It was a tremendous relief to have skilled help at hand and we felt that we were over the worst. We now also had all the porters we needed and in addition Caukwell had brought up a detachment of Nepalese soldiers.

At Khudi we changed porters and pressed on with all speed over the mountains to Kunchha, where we joined the main track from Kathmandu to Pokhara. The next morning we crossed the Madi Khola at Sisaghat Bazar (1,300 ft.) and ascended a stifflingly hot valley. On May 28 at the foot of the 1,000-ft. ascent to the village of Deorali, Firmin's pulse suddenly weakened, all efforts throughout the day failed to revive him, and at 4.10 P.M. he passed peacefully away. The great heat and the long journey had been too much for his heart. We were within one day's march of Pokhara airfield where an aeroplane would have been waiting to fly him to Calcutta.

Our kind friends at the Pokhara Mission Hospital arranged a simple and impressive funeral, at which the small Nepali Christian Community played a leading part. It was Whit Sunday.

Our verdict on Himal Chuli was that it is probably impossible from the south-west. On our way down we had a detached view of Caukwell's ice ridge and it is clear that it by-passes the first ice step but not

the second, which would have to be tackled by direct assault ; this looks impossible although one can never be dogmatic until one has rubbed one's nose against the place itself. If I were to attempt the mountain again I should try the east side.

I cannot conclude this brief account without reference to the kindness and help afforded to us at all stages of our trip : by the Nepalese Government and Army, by the British Chargé d'Affaires and staff at Kathmandu, by many individual Nepalese whom we encountered on the way, and above all by those tireless and devoted women at the Pokhara Mission Hospital.